The Arrangement S.S. Sahoo

# **A Pregnant Pause**

# Angela

Em walked out of the bathroom ahead of me, her eyes glossed with tears of joy. "I'm pregnant!" she cheered, and the room erupted into excitement. Everyone was ecstatic over the news.

Except for me.

I don't know why, but a piece of me burned with disappointment.

*Do I wish I was pregnant?* 

No, there was no way.

Xavier and I were just figuring out how to love each other.

It wouldn't be fair to bring a kid into the madness.

Not now, anyway.

And that was before I thought about the whole Claudia/Didi aspect.

As I watched Em jump into Lucas' arms, my father scooping them both into an elated hug, I realized what the anchor making my stomach sink was.

I wasn't disappointed. I was the disappointment. The one thing, the only thing, important to our parents was giving them grandchildren, adding branches to the family tree they'd planted for us. And I wasn't doing that. I wasn't ready not yet.

Was Xavier ready?

Then it hit me.

He already had a daughter.

How could he not know? Did he even want to know?

It wasn't like Claudia was still with him, right? If he found out...would he want to go back to her?

It wasn't like I could stop them. They were a family. Xavier and I were an arrangement.

I shot a look at Xavier as Emily threw her arms around me, laying her head on my shoulder in bliss. "I can't believe I'm going to be a mom, Angie. I didn't know I could feel this happy," she whispered.

I squeezed her with all my might, beaming.

"I love you, Em. And I'll love her too."

"Who says I'm having a her?"

"I did." I laughed, letting the question marks inside me straighten into exclamation points. Everyone was celebrating. Lucas was glowing, radiant with excitement, as if he had swallowed a sunrise. I've never seen him look so luminous.

"Then she'll be your niece. The best part of all of this is that my family is your family," Emily said.

At that moment, I wanted to empty out all the files of pain inside me and fold all my fears into paper cranes and then give every piece of me to Em and her future daughter.

I was happy for her—for all of us. Nothing was more important than this child.

That was what I told myself, over and over. But the blurred fears of what Xavier didn't know—the secret I was now actively keeping—still occupied a daunting dark corner in my mind.

# Xavier

When he heard the news, Dad insisted that he take the entire family out for a celebratory dinner at the most exclusive place he could.

Angela's dad and brothers were excited about the free gourmet food, but they didn't really know the price.

As Angela's family found their seats at the sleek sushi joint, Dad walked in, his hands intertwined with Penny's.

I glanced at Angela.

How could he bring this woman to our private family event?

She was nothing but the user who'd once begged to be in my bed.

I tried to control my breathing, to smother my anger down, but seeing them together was still a shock to my system.

At the same time, though, Dad did look happy. He was practically glowing.

I hadn't seen him laugh so hard, or so much, in decades.

*Maybe it was worth the fucked-up situation*. He deserved to be happy.

As the waiter served us cream-colored lychee martinis, I took a hearty swig.

Angela noticed and squeezed my hand, but I was too busy watching my father.

He couldn't keep his eyes off Penny, couldn't stop beaming at her.

I drank more.

*He deserves to be happy*, I reminded myself.

But then my gaze shifted to her.

She was clearly trying to downplay it—she wore a casual oversized T-shirt and some ripped jeans.

But she couldn't hide the designer Chanel bag slung over her shoulder, or the platinum bracelet dripping with diamonds around her wrist.

*The perks of dating a Knight*, I thought before I could stop myself.

And that was all it took for the anger to show its face.

"Penny, it must be nice to be *seated* at an upscale restaurant, without having to sing." I jabbed into her with my words.

"Well, I love to sing, but being here is nice," Penny replied, unscathed.

"Is it ever!" Dad agreed, grinning.

Our appetizers had arrived, and I wasted no time stuffing spicy tuna dripping with peach sauce into my mouth.

After literally *choosing* my wife, the man couldn't consider my feelings—or show human decency—before trying to replace my mother.

I just couldn't understand what he saw in her. Her history with Jacques, the psychopath. Her delicate features, her mane of hair.

She was hot, but not *marry* hot.

She was a rebound.

That was it.

And now that she was attached to my dad's hip, thrusting her right into the Knight spotlight, all of New York City had a full-access pass to my father's rebound, decades in the making.

But despite all that, despite the negative press and the mouths hanging open at the sight of them, it was like he didn't even care.

And the Knight reputation was something Dad always cared about.

It was why he got up in the morning and the last thought he had before going to sleep.

The only reason he'd ever let me get away with trashing it was because I was his son. He loved being my father more than he loved being a Knight.

## Then it hit me.

Did Penny mean that much to my dad?

"You really think he's happy?" I whispered into Angela's ear.

She tilted her head to Brad, who was giggling while watching Penny struggle with her chopsticks. The girl's salmon mango roll was turning into mush on her plate.

"Isn't it obvious?" Angela smiled back at me.

## Brad

#### I wanted to be happy, really.

Penny was soft and special. She couldn't fill the void of my lost wife, but her delicate voice was like a crimson thread that could stitch together the wound with joy.

But sitting at that table, celebrating the birth of someone else's grandchild, it made me yearn for more. For new life, a grandchild of my own.

Xavier and Angela had been together a year, a full year, and still there was no talk of family planning. Even though I'd never let the two of them hear me say it, it pained me. I wanted nothing more than to spoil a grandbaby or two of my own!

"Congratulations to my wonderful son, Lucas, and his beautiful wife, Em! It's too bad that you didn't have this news when I was sick. I swear, hearing I was having a grandchild would have fixed my heart and saved us a lot of stress!" Ken joked, as everyone raised their crystal glass in celebration.

I couldn't help but feel a little jealous of the man. The pair of us were cut from different cloth. There was no question about it. My Italian leather loafers and his scratched boots belonged to different worlds, but Angela's father looked happy.

The man had been to hell and back with his health over the past year, and still, I had never seen a more joyous person.

It was like he'd had everything he could ever hope for. Like he was content.

I'd never been content in my life, had always needed the next thing. Heck, I was doing it now, thinking of pressuring my son into having children just so I could know the joy of being a grandfather.

I got up from the table, trembling. I didn't want my family to see me like this—so *uncontrolled*.

"Excuse me," I mumbled and darted toward the restrooms, toward privacy, toward a place I could sulk without making it all about me.

Under the dim light of the lanterns hanging over me, I splashed some water across my face. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

Creak.

I turned around to the door, watching as Ken entered. I tried to pin a smile on my face.

## Brilliant.

"Thank you so much for taking us out. This restaurant is superb. I swear even fish couldn't resist this sushi," he said.

"It's my pleasure, Ken. It's the least I could do. I can't believe Em and Lucas just got married and are *already* having children. It's so exciting," I said, trying to maintain my dignity, to do the honorable thing.

The man had every right to be happy.

"I know you're upset," he replied.

"W–why would I be?" I fumbled, trying to keep my composure. It wasn't often a man could catch me off guard.

"Because I'm upset too."

I frowned. "You are? How?"

"Angela and Xavier are a beautiful couple. It's been a year, and I'm ... I'm expecting some beautiful grandchildren. Aren't you?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But tonight is about Em and Lucas."

"Nah, it's about family," Ken fired back. "Brad, you and I are family, and we need to encourage our kids to build theirs."

"What, you mean telling them what's on our minds? That's like peer pressure, Ken. I can't do that..."

"Oh, but I can."

I looked at the man across from me, seeing a glint behind his eyes.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"A little guilt to help do the trick. At least this heart condition can finally be put to some good use."

I couldn't help it. I let out a chuckle. I was shocked Ken would be so bold, but a part of me was also impressed.

# Angela

Just as the waiter set the deep-fried ice cream ablaze, Dad and Brad came back from the bathroom, exchanging friendly glances. It was surprising, and great, to see both Xavier's and my family hitting it off.

"You have to dig in first, Em," I said, handing her a spoon. She grinned, waiting for the flames to stop rippling over the delicacy, and then took a huge bite.

"Okay, I would do illegal things for this dessert. Seriously!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to have a second kid just so we can come back to this place."

"Or we can come back when you get pregnant, Angela," my dad said.

I felt my cheeks flare up, my face probably turning into a blotchy rose.

"Angela is more of a hole-in-the-wall kind of girl, Ken, you know that," Xavier replied easily.

"You're right. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the two of you have been married for a year, and Emily and Lucas just said their vows," my dad replied.

What was he doing?

#### He didn't need to remind us.

"They're not ready," Brad interjected, a smirk forming on his lips.

I saw our fathers exchange looks with each other.

Did they strategize an ambush in the men's room?

Dad reached across the table and took my hand. "Angle, what if something happens to my heart again? I can't bear the idea of leaving this world without having a grandchild of yours to say goodbye to."

*He didn't.* 

Part of me couldn't believe the way he was playing his cards, but the other part of me filled with what-ifs. What if he was right?

What if it had to happen now?

"Don't say that, Dad. I can't bear the idea of anything happening to you," I responded, feeling the weight of the world compressed in a lump in my throat.

I tried to look away, but he wouldn't let me. "You're about to become a grandpa already!"

"What about Brad? Xavier, you are his only son. Doesn't he deserve a grandchild?"

That was when I felt my face drain of its color.

The truth curled through me in electric waves.

Brad did have a grandchild, and he had no idea she existed.

When I'd promised to keep the secret for Claudia, I didn't just vow to hide it from Xavier. I was deceiving Brad, too.

My father-in-law was the reason I still had a father. Not only had he given me Xavier but he had also saved the most important person in my life before him.

To hide his granddaughter from him was like amputating a limb off his family tree.

I looked hard at Xavier. How can he not know?

The secret felt like a thousand phones ringing inside me, needing to be answered.

The words were ready to fall out of my mouth. So I shoveled as much ice cream as possible inside, practically devouring the entire dessert.

Xavier grabbed my spoon as I dove in for another bite. He laced his fingers through mine, alarmed.

"Is something wrong?" he pressed.

I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut. Telling him the truth, here, in front of everyone, would kill him. I needed to stay silent, even if it was killing me.

But he wasn't going to let me die in peace.

He moved his face closer, peering deep into my eyes. "What's going on? Are you... hiding something?"